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The Jakarta Attacks: Coping with the ISIS Threat

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The recent Jakarta attacks claimed by ISIS represent a clear statement of intent that the organization is serious in seeking to expand its operations into Southeast Asia. Regional governments must prepare to meet the challenge head-on.

Commentary

ON 14 January 2016, four Indonesian militants mounted a brazen lunchtime grenade-and-firearm assault on a Starbucks Café and a police post in the immediate vicinity of the Sarinah Mall in downtown Jakarta. The general area boasts government offices, shopping malls and eateries as well as a United Nations office and the United States embassy. The attackers were killed by the security forces, but three civilians, including one Canadian, died in the fire fight. Twenty others were injured including four foreigners from the Netherlands, Algeria, Austria and Germany.

Indonesian police remarked that the modus operandi of the Jakarta militants appeared reminiscent of the devastating Paris assault by ISIS-directed mobile squads in November 2015 in which 130 people were killed. It eventually emerged that the assault was apparently directed by Muhammad Bahrin Naim, an Indonesian extremist blogger and activist with ties to local terrorist networks. Naim is also today allegedly a leading figure within the Syria-based Katibah Nusantara unit, comprising largely Indonesian and Malaysian fighters, and part of the notorious Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) - the hyper-violent hybrid terrorist/insurgent entity that controls swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq. In his blogs Naim had praised the Paris attacks and had sent funds to an emerging ISIS cell in Solo to carry out a similar operation in the Indonesian capital.

Why regional governments must take note

Though the casualty toll was (thankfully) paltry compared to the Paris incident of two months ago, the Jakarta attack should be viewed as a statement of intent that Indonesia and regional governments should heed, for two reasons:

The Southeast Asian Cultural Hinterland

First, aside from its importance for global maritime trade, Southeast Asia is home to a quarter of the world's 1.6 billion Muslim population and is thus a natural "strategic reserve" for ISIS. The ISIS leader, Abu Bakr Baghdadi, seeks not merely to consolidate the Islamic Caliphate he declared in June 2014 within its current Levantine (territorial) epicentre, but also, however improbably, expand it worldwide. In this connection, Southeast Asia has been targeted for incorporation within the imperial designs of the ISIS leadership. Some argue that Southeast Asian "Islam with a smiling face" - exemplified by the well-known progressive Indonesian mass organisations Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, who between them boast tens of millions of members - is well placed to deal with the violent Islamist fringe represented by ISIS and its ilk. Such sanguine assumptions are misplaced.

Regional bastions of (authentic) Southeast Asian Islam have in recent times been engaged in a rearguard struggle against what is sometimes called "Wahhabi colonialism" - a reference to the so-called "desert Islam" being circulated in Indonesia and the wider region by a network of religious and educational institutions as well as pressure groups funded by Middle Eastern donors.

The rigidly puritanical fundamentalism of Wahhabism arguably sustains the virulent ISIS ideology - so effectively disseminated worldwide across diverse social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. It would be unwise to imagine that this intertwined theological and ideological challenge to Southeast Asian Islam can be addressed in ad hoc fashion.

The Indirect Approach

The second is the indirect strategy. In its statement claiming the Jakarta attacks ISIS declared that its "soldiers of the caliphate" had struck a blow against "the crusader alliance". This meant that foreign nationals of the countries in the US-led coalition currently bombing ISIS positions in Iraq and Syria were targeted in the Indonesian capital. The apparent targets in the attack - Starbucks and the Sarinah Mall - are certainly frequented by Westerners.

This strategy of avoiding superior coalition military strength in the Levant and attacking its interests in areas of relative weakness, such as (ill-defended) soft targets in Southeast Asia, is not new. It is an application of the well-worn "indirect approach", long known to military strategists from Sun Tzu to Liddell Hart. Paris was one application of this strategy; Jakarta is now another. ISIS may well be compensating for its steadily deteriorating strategic situation in Iraq and Syria in the face of coalition military pressure by upping the ante overseas.

As far as Southeast Asia is concerned, the ISIS indirect strategy can be operationalized in three ways. First, returning ISIS fighters could be recruited to mount new attacks. Second, Syria-based ISIS leaders could co-opt from a distance sympathetic individual freelance militants and existing cells and groups such as MIT in Indonesia and Abu Sayyaf in the southern Philippines, turning them into operational adjuncts of ISIS.

The Jakarta attacks arguably represent precisely this *modus operandi* as Naim apparently funded and directed a Solo-based cell to undertake the attacks. Third, ISIS could again from afar encourage relatively less sophisticated lone wolf attacks against coalition nationals. Moreover, lone wolves could also be self-radicalised “insiders”, from commercial airline pilots as we have seen in Indonesia and armed forces and even airport screening personnel in Malaysia, to national servicemen in Singapore. The ISIS indirect threat, in short, is multi-faceted and ignored at our peril.

A Two-Pronged Response is Still Needed

A two-pronged response seems apposite. First, the real-time physical threat needs addressing by various means. These include enhanced intelligence exchange on terrorist identities, movements, logistics and funding pipelines between and within governments in the region and with key foreign partners; capacity-building programs to assist regional countries reduce their susceptibility to penetration by ISIS and affiliated groups; and finally, calibrated force twinned with enhanced legal frameworks to deal nimbly with rapidly emerging cells, as well as newly released militants who may still pose a residual threat.

Second, the underlying conditions that give rise to the physical threat in the first place also require policy measures. These include better political and socio-economic governance to diminish the grievances that ISIS extremism feeds upon and wider understanding of the drivers of radicalisation into ISIS extremism. Expanded grassroots awareness of the attitudinal and behavioral indicators of self-radicalisation into violent extremism is needed as well.

Finally, intensified regional and international exchanges of best practices in counter-ideological and related theological efforts to defeat ISIS extremism online or offline is utterly required. In sum, nothing radically new is required. Rather, as the legendary British General Sir Gerald Templer once asserted decades ago in another context, what is really needed is that existing methods are applied at a higher tempo and much more effectively.

Kumar Ramakrishna is Associate Professor and Head of Policy Studies in the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
